



CAUSEWAY COAST AONB SUMMARY MANAGEMENT PLAN

Environment and Heritage Service

April 2003

FOREWORD BY ANGELA SMITH MP

I have been immensely privileged to have had the conservation of the Causeway Coast within my portfolio at the Northern Ireland Office. The Causeway Coast is one of the most spectacular stretches of coastline in Europe. At its heart is the Giant's Causeway World Heritage Site but it contains much more in the way of outstanding scenery, including dramatic cliffs, stunning beaches and impressive monuments. For these reasons the coastline between Portrush and Ballycastle was designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty in 1989.

Since then much has been done to promote the appreciation and enjoyment of what is undoubtedly one of Northern Ireland's finest landscapes. Opportunities for public access have been greatly improved and interpretive panels have been installed at a number of key locations. Measures have been implemented to conserve fragile habitats at such places as White Park Bay, Runkerry, Portrush and on the cliffs above the Giant's Causeway itself. There have also been important new tourism developments such as the Heritage Railway that runs between Bushmills and the Giant's Causeway.

This activity has not been taking place within a strategic vacuum. I know that my officials in the Department of Environment have worked closely on these and other projects with their counterparts in Moyle District Council, Coleraine Borough Council, the National Trust, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and other Departments and Agencies. In recent years the Causeway Initiative provided the opportunity for a strategic review of tourism development and environmental management along the North Coast. As a direct result of this Initiative the Causeway Coast and Glens Heritage Trust has been formed, providing a mechanism for co-ordinating visitor management and conservation across the AONB.

The popularity of the Giant's Causeway and some other locations along the coast has, not surprisingly, led to concerns that the very qualities that make the AONB so special are being threatened through a combination of visitor pressure and an associated demand for development. Against this backdrop, the devolved administration took the wise decision to prepare a management plan for the AONB. Consultants were appointed in 2002 and they have produced a series of recommendations and actions. Recognising that many of these will require detailed consideration by the bodies that are responsible for their implementation, Environment and Heritage Service is publishing this summary management plan to accompany the consultants' recommendations.

The management plan provides the framework for the conservation and enjoyment of this wonderful coastline – a coastline that provides the setting and context to the Giant's Causeway, one of the most important scenic attractions on the island of Ireland. I believe it should serve as a call to action for all those bodies that have a role to play in safeguarding this area so that future generations can be as much inspired by its beauty as we are today.

1. INTRODUCTION

What is the Management Plan?

Landscape Design Associates and PLB Consulting Ltd were commissioned in January 2002 by Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) of the Department of the Environment to prepare recommendations for a Management Plan for the Causeway Coast Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

The AONB Management Plan is a plan prepared to guide the future protection, management and enjoyment of the special landscape of the Causeway Coast AONB. It highlights the unique qualities of the AONB, sets out a long-term holistic vision for the area and includes objectives and actions to help secure that vision. It also provides proposals on a management structure to ensure the implementation of the plan.

The AONB Management Plan is not a statutory planning document. Its primary purpose is to help guide and inform decision-making and management in the area in relation to the many environmental, economic, social and other issues, in a fully integrated way. It will be used to inform the preparation of policies by the Department's Planning Service within the emerging Northern Area Plan. The Department has already initiated the statutory process to prepare an Area Plan covering the Council areas of Ballymoney, Coleraine, Limavady and Moyle Districts. The Draft Area Plan is programmed for publication in draft form during 2003. The statutory process for preparing that Plan includes provision for objections to its policies and proposals, and for such objections to be considered at public inquiry.

The AONB Management Plan also provides the context in which a management plan specifically for the Giant's Causeway World Heritage Site (WHS) will be prepared. The Northern Area Plan will formally identify the setting of the WHS, and formulate local planning policies for that site and its setting within the wider AONB.

Who is the Management Plan for?

The AONB Management Plan is being produced on behalf of all those who care for the area. It is an advisory document that seeks to provide a common framework for government departments, local authorities, national and regional agencies, amenity bodies and community organisations, as well as landowners. By seeking to achieve its objectives and implement the action points, organisations and individuals will signal their commitment to conserving the special qualities of the AONB.

How is the Management Plan presented?

The Management Plan is presented in three volumes:

Volume One: **The Summary Management Plan**, which includes the Department's vision for the AONB, the aims and strategic objectives of the Management Plan, and proposals for a management structure to co-ordinate the delivery of the action plan.

Volume Two: The Consultants' recommendations to the Department including proposed actions.

Volume Three: Appendices

The Summary Management Plan follows closely the format adopted by the consultants. Their work identified five key themes:

Theme One – Conserving and Enhancing Natural Beauty

Theme Two – Sustainable Development and the Local Economy

Theme Three – Living in the AONB

Theme Four – Appreciating and Enjoying the Landscape

Theme Five – The World Heritage Site in the Context of the AONB.

The vision for the AONB

It is important to consider the AONB in the long term as well as focussing on immediate concerns. The vision is an expression of what we believe most people in Northern Ireland would want the AONB to be like in, say, 50 years time. The vision is about creative, optimistic and achievable aspirations for the future.

The Department's vision for the Causeway Coast AONB is a coastal area which:

- is universally recognised as containing world class, spectacular and unspoilt scenery, comprising unique geological features and cultural history and supporting outstanding assemblages of habitats and species;
- houses vibrant communities and is a source of local and national identity and an inspiration to all as an exemplar of sustainable environmental management.
- is made accessible for all to enjoy and learn about in ways which are sustainable, thus conserving this fragile environment and giving people an uplifting experience of landscape and a memory for life.

The aims of the Management Plan

The Management Plan sets out a framework within which the AONB will be conserved and managed to ensure its protection and enjoyment for future generations. Specifically the Management Plan has three aims:

AIM 1:

Enable a clearer understanding of the unique qualities and sensitivities of the area and thus ensure the appropriate application of sustainable management principles.

There is already an appreciation of 'good practice' and sustainability principles and strong aspirations to achieve these. There is however scope for greater understanding of what makes the area special, the important components of the landscape and sensitivity to change.

AIM 2:

Provide a fully integrated approach to all aspects of management across the whole of the AONB by addressing AONB-wide issues (such as transportation) as well as their relationship to specific challenges experienced at key sites.

There is a need to plan and manage development in the area so that it serves the purposes of the AONB designation. This will require a sustainable approach to ensure an appropriate long-term

vision of landscape protection and use, and the retention of an attractive environment that facilitates a thriving tourist economy in the AONB. It will also require an understanding of the relationship of the AONB with adjacent areas such as the Antrim Coast and Glens AONB. Equally, there is a need to understand the relationship between the whole of the AONB and individual sites, such as White Park Bay and Carrick-a-Rede.

AIM 3:

Present a new management structure and delivery mechanism to implement the vision and identified objectives.

There is a need to develop a coherent approach to management because there is a substantial number of stakeholders operating in the area and various environmental and tourism strategies and initiatives that embrace the AONB have been prepared. The need for an integrated approach has been strongly supported during consultation and this is reflected in the proposals for a new management structure for the area.

2. LEGISLATIVE BACKGROUND

AONB Designation

The Amenity Lands Act (Northern Ireland) 1965 made provision for the creation of both National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. This early legislation aimed to protect special landscapes through the control of development but no provision was made for positive management or promotion.

The Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 provided a new impetus for the management of countryside and scenic areas. The status it gave to AONBs was significantly strengthened by the powers it introduced to make proposals for their conservation and enjoyment.

In 1989, the Department of the Environment made an Order designating the Causeway Coast Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). This designation gives formal statutory recognition to the quality of the landscape of the North Antrim coastline between Ballycastle and Portrush, centred upon the Giant's Causeway. Designation was accompanied by the publication entitled 'Causeway Coast Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty – A Guide to Designation'. This was aimed at raising the profile of the area and awareness of issues affecting the landscape and the need for policies that were sensitive to its distinctive features. This Management Plan takes forward and builds upon this publication.

The Causeway Coast AONB has a close relationship with the neighbouring Antrim Coast and Glens AONB which includes the coast, glens and upland plateau between Ballycastle to just north of Larne. Indeed the two areas were designated as a single AONB under the Amenity Lands Act.

Other Environmental Designations

The Causeway Coast AONB stretches from the edge of Portrush in the west to Ballycastle in the east. It encompasses an area of spectacular coastal scenery stretching approximately 18 miles. Yet, despite its small size, it contains an extraordinary variety of rich natural and cultural landscapes reflected in its numerous designations (see also diagrams 2 and 3 in Volume Two):

World Heritage Site (WHS): The stones at the Giants Causeway and the surrounding cliffs were designated by UNESCO as a WHS in 1986. It is one of only three 'natural' World Heritage Sites in the UK.

Area of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI): There are seven ASSIs within the AONB which cover various coastal features including cliffs, beaches and dune systems. These areas are important for their ecological and geological value.

Special Area of Conservation (SAC): Under the European Union's Habitats Directive, these areas are designated to protect some of the most seriously threatened habitats and species across Europe. The coastline between Runkerry and White Park Bay forms part of the North Antrim Coast candidate SAC which has been selected for various coastal habitats.

Special Protection Area (SPA): Under the European Union's Birds Directive, Sheep Island has been classified an SPA for its internationally important Cormorant population.

National Nature Reserve (NNR): The area of the Giant's Causeway is designated a National Nature Reserve for its geological uniqueness and diversity of plant communities from shoreline habitats to heathland on the cliff tops.

Ancient Monuments: There is a substantial number of ancient monuments in the AONB including, for example, passage tombs and raths, earthworks at Dunluce and the ruins of Dunseverick Castle.

State Care Monuments: There are three State Care Monuments owned and managed by EHS within the AONB; Dunluce Castle, Lissanduff Earthworks and Kinbane Castle.

Conservation Areas: The central area of Bushmills is designated a Conservation Area in recognition of its architectural and historic interest giving rise to its particular character and sense of place.

Listed Buildings: The AONB has a substantial number of listed buildings, the majority occurring in settlements such as Bushmills but also including rural vernacular buildings and structures associated with farming and fishing.

Long Distance Footpaths: The Causeway Coast Way, which is part of the Ulster Way long distance route, passes through the length of the AONB and is one of a network of waymarked ways throughout Northern Ireland.

Statutory Planning Policies for AONBs

Statutory planning policy and development plan frameworks are concerned primarily with guiding the control of physical development and use of land. They are implemented through the development plan and development control processes. Planning policies relating specifically to the environment help to ensure the positive and sustainable use of environmental resources. The planning system can significantly affect change in the landscape and therefore, where appropriate, Area Plans may include specific policies relating to AONBs. Such policies may be derived from several sources:

Regional Development Strategy (RDS) for Northern Ireland 2025 – Shaping Our Future
Chapter 12 of the RDS sets out policies in relation to Caring for the Environment. Policy ENV 1.4 is to

'protect, enhance and encourage appreciation of the Region's landscapes'

The explanatory text under this policy states that AONB's should be managed

'so as to conserve their distinctive character, their nature conservation and built heritage interest, to enhance employment opportunities for the local community and provide enjoyment for visitors'.

A Planning Strategy for Rural Northern Ireland (1997)

This document sets out general policy for the protection of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and states under Policy DES 4:

'To require development proposals in Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty to be sensitive to the distinctive character of the area and the quality of their landscape, heritage and wildlife.'

It also states

'While the designation policy is one of protection and enhancement of these special landscapes, in applying the planning policy, account will be taken of the needs of local communities and the need to sustain the economic and social well-being of those living in the AONBs.'

And

'Designation as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty does not necessarily rule out certain forms of development. However the first principle of practice is that the Department will not be prepared to permit schemes that would be detrimental to environmental quality.'

What is clear from these policies is that despite the acknowledgement that development may be desirable from a local perspective, any development, for whatever need or purpose, should not be detrimental to environmental quality. As explained in Policy DES 4 these qualities in the AONB relate to its distinctive landscape character, natural beauty, heritage and wildlife.

The North East Area Plan (to 2002)

The North East Area Plan includes the following principal objective:

'the conservation of fine landscapes, natural amenities and wildlife habitats.'

The Causeway Coast AONB has received protection in the Area Plan as a Countryside Policy Area (CPA). This policy aims to protect areas of high landscape quality from development pressure in order to maintain their rural character and to protect their visual amenity. The Area Plan contains no local policies which recognise specific variations in character of the AONB landscape or its sensitivity to development.

The Northern Area Plan

The Northern Area Plan is currently being prepared and will replace the North East Area Plan. The Northern Area Plan Issues Paper (April 2002) indicates that it will address these current gaps in local policy and will make specific reference to protecting and enhancing the AONB landscape. In particular a 'Countryside Assessment' will be carried out as part of the Northern Area Plan and will assist in building up a more comprehensive database on landscape features and elements within the AONB.

Planning Policy Statement 6 – Planning, Archaeology and the Built Heritage

This document includes policies for the protection of World Heritage Sites (see Theme Five in Section 3)

Planning Policy Statement 2 – Planning and Nature Conservation

This sets out the Department's planning policies relevant to statutory nature conservation designations and sites of local wildlife importance.

3 STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

The Management Plan is divided into five themes which represent core subject areas.

Theme One – Conserving and Enhancing Natural Beauty

The key purposes of the Causeway Coast AONB designation is to conserve and enhance the natural beauty and amenities of the area and to promote the enjoyment of its landscapes. To achieve these it is essential that the visual, ecological, historic and cultural values of the AONB are fully recognised by all concerned and are reflected in the area's planning and management. The special qualities of the area are finite and irreplaceable resources of international and national significance.

Consultation with organisations and the general public revealed a number of issues that were considered to affect the special qualities of the AONB. These included:

- a continuing loss of local vernacular features such as field boundaries, gate posts and traditional farm buildings;
- a proliferation of diverse signage throughout the AONB;
- significant development pressures acting on the land (including housing, hotels, radio masts, car parks) and also within coastal areas from potential developments such as windfarms, fish farms and water sports;
- a loss of ecological diversity with conservation management focusing on designated areas rather than the wider landscape;
- a lack of comprehensive data on the area's archaeological resources;
- the gradual adverse impact of development on the open and unspoilt views of the coast;
- sand and gravel extraction from some beaches.

Understanding Landscape Character within the AONB

Landscape character assessment is recognized, both at a European¹ and national level², as a means of understanding the landscape resources of an area of countryside. It is used as a basis for describing and appraising the variation in landscape and the components that make it special. It can be used in many ways, including as a framework for landscape management, as an indicator of change and as a basis for the development of design guides or interpretation strategies.

In order to identify and describe the variety of local landscape character found within the Causeway Coast, a detailed assessment of the AONB has been undertaken using standard and recognised methodologies as part of the preparation of this Management Plan (see Appendix 1). From this work six Landscape Character Areas have been identified (see diagram 4 in Volume Two).

- The Skerries Coast

¹ European Landscape Convention

² Landscape Character Assessment Guidance (2002) Countryside Agency and Scottish Natural Heritage

- Bush Valley
- Causeway Plateau
- Magpie Coast
- Kinbane Coast
- Ballycastle Valley

The key characteristics which make these landscapes unique are described in Appendix 2. The sensitivity of these landscapes to change is also explored in relation to existing pressures or forces. Following an understanding of these areas, management guidelines have been developed, some of which are AONB wide, for example maintenance of traditional field boundaries and protection of key views to landmarks. Other management guidelines are more specific and target particular Landscape Character Areas in order to protect their distinctive qualities. A full description of these management guidelines can be found in Appendix 2.

Key Objectives

The following objectives have been identified as a result of an assessment and analysis of the issues affecting the AONB and through consultation. Proposed actions associated with each objective are presented in Volume Two of the Management Plan.

Objective A: To conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the AONB

Objective B: To ensure that any development which is permitted supports the purposes of the AONB and does not undermine the quality and special distinctiveness of the landscape as set out in the landscape character assessment.

Objective C: To maintain and enhance the biodiversity of the AONB

Objective D: To protect and increase understanding of the cultural heritage and archaeology of the AONB

Theme Two – Sustainable Development and the Local Economy

The Causeway Coast AONB and the Giant's Causeway World Heritage Site are economically and culturally important to the whole of Northern Ireland. As well as an established agricultural sector, the area also has a thriving tourism industry and a wide range of other businesses.

Consultation with organisations and the general public revealed a number of issues that were considered to affect sustainable development and the local economy of the AONB. These included:

- unemployment across the area;
- the importance of tourism and agriculture to the local economy and the need to protect these employment sectors;
- changes to the agricultural economy and pressures on the farming community;
- no overall economic strategy for the AONB as distinct from the economic strategies for Moyle District and Coleraine Borough Councils;
- skills deficiencies amongst certain sectors of the workforce and a lack of training opportunities for tourism employment and associated enterprises;
- the need to maintain the distinctive character of settlements within the AONB through sensitive developments.

Growth in Tourism

Although tourism is not currently a major element of the Northern Ireland economy, accounting as it does for only around 1.8% of GDP, within and immediately around the AONB it is enormously important. Tourism is estimated to support more than 3,000 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) jobs in Coleraine Borough³ and 950 jobs in Moyle⁴. This is equivalent to around 12% of the whole workforce in Coleraine, and 19% of Moyle's workforce. Within the AONB the only other economic sector that employs relatively large numbers of people is agriculture, which plays a large role in shaping the landscape that appeals to so many visitors.

The nature of tourism in Northern Ireland is changing, with new markets developing and the traditional seaside resorts such as Portrush and Portstewart finding it more difficult to attract visitors for any length of time. Tourism trends that will impact upon the future economic well-being of the AONB include:

- an increasing number of short breaks being taken in Northern Ireland by tourists from other parts of the UK and Northern Europe;
- increasing interest in activity holidays including walking, cycling, golf and fishing;
- growing interest in 'cultural tourism', an area that covers both the built heritage and also customs and traditions;

³ Source: Coleraine Borough Council (2001) *Tourism Development Strategy and Action Plan 2001 - 2010*

⁴ Source: Moyle District Council, personal communication

- the continued importance of tourism associated with specific events such as the North West 200.

It is therefore essential that the Management Plan for the Causeway Coast provides for the maintenance of a sustainable tourism presence and other employment consistent with AONB objectives, and indeed that it seeks to increase employment prospects in line with Government objectives. Fundamentally, there is significant potential and opportunity to develop the tourism industry in the AONB in a sensitive and sustainable way.

Moves to strengthen links between the landscape of the AONB and the local economy are already afoot through the work of the Causeway Initiative. The Causeway Initiative was established in 2000 and aimed to promote sustainable tourism and best practice visitor and environmental management in the combined Causeway Coast and Antrim Coast and Glens area. Under this initiative grant assistance was distributed to 29 sustainable tourism projects operating in the area. The Causeway Initiative also commissioned a range of research projects, notably the North East Visitor and Environmental Management Strategy and other research such as a Sustainability Indicator Study.

A key objective for the Causeway Initiative was to establish a more permanent tourism and environment partnership for the area. This has been achieved with the establishment of the Causeway Coast and Glens Heritage Trust in May 2002. This body will have an important role in promoting best practice visitor and environmental management in the Causeway Coast and Glens Area. One of the primary objectives of the Trust will be to demonstrate the close relationship between the quality of the local environment and the local economy, particularly tourism, by raising awareness of the need for visitor and environmental management. The Trust can hopefully help safeguard and even enhance the special landscapes within its area for the benefit of local residents and visitors alike.

Key Objectives

The following objectives have been identified as a result of an assessment and analysis of the issues affecting the AONB and through consultation. Proposed actions associated with each objective are presented in Volume Two of the Management Plan.

Objective E: To ensure land-use planning and development decisions help to protect the landscape resource upon which most economic activity within the AONB is based.

Objective F: To ensure that economic activity supports investment in environmental conservation and promotes high quality design.

Objective G: To establish a thriving and sustainable economy within the AONB, which supports the purposes of the AONB and sustainability principles.

Objective H: To strengthen linkages between the local agricultural economy and the tourism and hospitality sector.

Objective I: To provide alternative employment opportunities for local residents unable or unwilling to work in the tourism and farming sectors.

Theme Three – Living in the AONB

Many people live and work within the Causeway Coast AONB and there are many social and economic issues that are of concern to the population within the AONB. Local residents have a pivotal role to play in protecting and managing the landscape and in return should benefit from conservation activities and tourism initiatives.

Over the last ten years the Causeway Coast AONB has become an increasingly popular place to live, particularly because of its spectacular coastal scenery and undeveloped rural character. As a result there has been a marked growth in second and holiday home developments. The result of this trend has been to change the character of some settlements (either due to increased size or loss of local services), having an adverse impact on the social cohesiveness and vitality of some local communities. The increased demand for homes in the area has also tended to fuel house price increases, resulting in concerns that there is a lack of affordable housing for people living permanently in the area.

Consultation with organisations and the general public revealed a number of issues that were considered to affect the local population of the AONB. These included:

- a lack of basic facilities in some settlements (for example shops);
- a demand for better public transport;
- increasing numbers of second and holiday homes which undermine community cohesion;
- planning policies unhelpful to local people and a perceived lack of affordable housing;
- a lack of local community and cultural expression.

Key Objectives

The following objectives have been identified as a result of an assessment and analysis of the issues affecting the AONB and through consultation. Proposed actions associated with each objective are presented in Volume Two of the Management Plan.

Objective J: To seek opportunities to improve the quality of life for local communities.

Objective K: Support and encourage projects that help communities to enjoy and celebrate their local environment.

Objective L: Recognise that information and communication is a key to the success of managing the AONB and in encouraging local participation and sense of belonging.

Theme Four – Appreciating and Enjoying the Landscape

The dramatic Causeway Coast landscape and its diverse range of attractions are appreciated and enjoyed by both its residents and its many visitors. Without careful visitor management, of which the provision of information is an important aspect, an increasing number of visitors could well result in the overuse and deterioration of the very experience that people are seeking.

Consultation with organisations and the general public revealed a number of issues that were considered to affect the appreciation, enjoyment and understanding of the special qualities of the AONB. These included:

- the information available for the area is often inconsistent, reinforcing individual sites rather than whole of the AONB as the context for those sites;
- visitors tend to concentrate at three key sites (the Giant's Causeway, Carrick-a-Rede and Old Bushmills Distillery) resulting in 'honey pots' and limited spread of visitors to other parts of the AONB;
- a lack of physical integration between points of interest through footpaths, cycleways, bus services or other means of sustainable transport;
- the predicted growth of visitor numbers is likely to compound many of the existing visitor management issues;
- an increasing interest and demand for access to the countryside but as yet a poor network of public paths away from the Coastal Path;
- farmers have concerns over public liability when permitting public access onto their land.

Access, Recreation and Enjoying the Landscape

A Countryside Recreation Strategy⁵ has recently been prepared on behalf of the Causeway Coast and Glens Heritage Trust and has reviewed recreation provision covering the area of the Causeway Coast AONB.

The north coast is one of the best areas in Ireland for surfing, sea kayaking/canoeing and windsurfing. Other water-based recreation within the AONB includes boat trips, angling, diving and some sailing.

Currently there are few public footpaths within the AONB although there are areas of open access along the foreshore and beaches. The Causeway Coast Way (the longest footpath route within the AONB), runs between Portrush and Ballycastle along beaches, cliff tops and rocky shores, providing access to some of the most wild, rugged and spectacular parts of the AONB. However it is currently a linear route with few connecting footpaths (except at the WHS) that allow the visitor to undertake a circular walk. The recent introduction of the Causeway Rambler bus service has sought to address this issue.

⁵ Causeway Coast and Glens Countryside Recreation Strategy (2002) Ferguson and McIlveen & Judith Annett

Promotion and Interpretation of the AONB

The AONB boundary is currently expressed on the ground with brown road signs at the key entry points. However, it has a very low profile in the minds of most visitors and local residents. Although the Giant's Causeway, Carrick-a-Rede rope bridge, Bushmills Distillery and Dunluce Castle are very well known, this is very largely in their own right rather than as linked places of interest within the AONB as a whole.

Access to information within and about the AONB is fragmentary and lacking in comprehensive coverage. Fundamentally, the AONB is not perceived as a 'product' (as a place with particular qualities or characteristics) or as a destination in its entirety. This is reinforced by information available on the internet where a number of different websites provide a brief overview of key sites within the AONB and focus on the Giant's Causeway. There is no website on the AONB as a whole.

Because of the high profile of the Giant's Causeway WHS in Northern Ireland's tourism strategy, the specific visitor management issues at the Causeway often dominate the AONB as a whole. Despite the dramatic and diverse coastline of the AONB, it is the Causeway itself that forms the focus of most visitors' attention, thus creating an imbalance in the AONB as a destination and, crucially, in the communication of its overall natural and cultural heritage significance.

Interpretation of various aspects of the AONB is delivered through a variety of media at different sites across the AONB. Visitor centres have been established at Portrush, Dunluce Castle and the Giant's Causeway. In 1998 an Interpretation Strategy was developed for the AONB and resulted in the provision of a suite of interpretation panels that provided information on the surrounding coastal scenery and wildlife, history and legends. These panels were erected at popular car parks and viewpoints along the coast within the AONB.

Printed material on the AONB includes the illustrated *Guide to the Causeway Coast Way* and the more comprehensive book, *The Giants Causeway and the North Antrim Coast*. The National Trust offers accompanied guided walks and talks from its base at the Causeway, and is currently in the process of producing a series of panels to augment information provided at its centre at the Giant's Causeway. There is a number of publications available on the Giant's Causeway itself.

A network of Tourist Information Centres (TICs) currently serves the Causeway Coast AONB. Two are located just outside the AONB boundary at Dunluce Centre, Portrush (seasonal), and within the council offices at Ballycastle. A third TIC is located at the Giant's Causeway Visitor Centre.

The case for an orientation facility

Orientation facilities are a tried and tested approach to providing a 'first point of call' for visitors to a particular area of countryside or coast. They are a feature of most National Parks and many AONBs in England and Wales where they provide a range of functions. These include the provision of information on attractions, accommodation, transport and walks within the area, as well as providing a centre for co-ordinating management and providing interpretation for the wider area.

As with TICs, orientation facilities are best located in areas that can act as service centres or 'nodes' (ie existing settlements) for visitors arriving to an area. It is important that they are close to, or form part of, a transport interchange and thus are easily accessible and can offer visitors a choice of transport to explore the surrounding area. Locating orientation facilities within existing settlements can have the added advantage of bringing increased revenue to the settlement and local population. (During the consultation both Bushmills and Ballycastle were proposed as suitable locations).

Currently there is no such facility for the AONB and visitors tend to head straight for the Giant's Causeway (the number one visitor attraction of the AONB) or other key attractions such as Carrick-a-Rede. The establishment and promotion of an AONB orientation facility within the AONB could have a number of benefits. For example, it could:

- make a significant contribution to raising the profile of the AONB;
- help to reduce congestion and ease pressure at the Giant's Causeway and other key visitor sites;
- provide information relating to the whole of the AONB and local visitor attractions;
- assist in encouraging visitors to stay longer in the vicinity and thus increase spend;
- provide an opportunity to promote sustainable modes of transport around the AONB by integrating with bus routes, heritage train, footpaths, cycle routes etc.

Key Objectives

The following objectives have been identified as a result of an assessment and analysis of the issues affecting the AONB and through consultation. Proposed actions associated with each objective are presented in Volume Two of the Management Plan.

Objective M: To reinforce and raise the profile of the AONB.

Objective N: To reduce the number of vehicle movements and congestion at key attractions within the AONB and encourage people to move around using sustainable modes of transport.

Objective O: To encourage people to engage more closely with the landscape by walking, cycling or horse riding

Objective P: To develop a recreational strategy, which promotes active recreation in keeping with the purposes of the AONB and manages the impact of such pursuits.

Objective Q: To communicate the significance of the AONB and the need for its continued conservation and enhancement, by providing interpretation that builds an overall cohesive AONB experience for the visitor

Objective R: To ensure that the interpretation provision, choice of media and method of presentation responds to specific audiences

Objective S: To increase visitor stay within the AONB.

Objective T: To establish a central information and orientation facility within the AONB to act as the heart (or hub) of the AONB and to provide general information to the visitor about the AONB landscape, key attractions and transport options.

Objective U: To establish a range of high quality facilities at key attractions throughout the AONB, which provide specific information and interpretation about those sites.

Theme Five – The World Heritage Site in the Context of the AONB

The Giant's Causeway is one of only three natural World Heritage Sites in the UK. The safeguarding of the Giant's Causeway is not just the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Government but is also an international responsibility involving organisations such as UNESCO, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the UK Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS).

The Giant's Causeway was identified as suitable for inclusion on the list of World Heritage Sites because it met two of the criteria set out in the 1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (the World Heritage Convention, namely:

'is an outstanding example representing major stages of earth's history, including the record of life, significant on-going geological processes in the development of landforms, or significant geomorphic or physiographic features' (criteria 1).

and

'contains superlative natural phenomena or areas of exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic importance' (criteria 3).

The criteria for designation demonstrate the importance of protecting the Giant's Causeway's outstanding aesthetic value and natural beauty as well as its geology.

The WHS is owned and managed by the National Trust and Moyle District Council. The National Trust owns the stones themselves and cliff top footpaths while Moyle District Council owns land around the Causeway Head on which the car park and visitor centre are located.

The Giant's Causeway is the single most important site within the AONB. Understanding its relationship to the AONB is a crucial aspect of this Management Plan:

- the AONB performs a significant role in providing the setting to the coastal scenery and the WHS;
- conservation and visitor management issues at the WHS are more acute than elsewhere in the AONB. Their resolution will contribute to successful consideration of wider management issues within the AONB;
- management of the wider AONB can contribute positively towards protection of the WHS (both the site and its context/setting).

Earlier studies⁶ have set out the detailed issues affecting the World Heritage Site and its management. This Management Plan verifies many of the issues previously identified and takes forward those issues that are relevant to management within the context of the wider AONB. These issues are considered to be:

- the importance of the wider landscape setting to the WHS;

⁶ Giant's Causeway Sustainable Management Strategic Plan, Consarc (2000) and NNR Management Plan, National Trust (2002).

- the effects of existing development and pressures for further development within the WHS and immediate area;
- the need to protect and enhance the natural beauty and scenic qualities of the site;
- the need to address public safety issues on and around the site;
- the effects that vehicular congestion have on the approaches to, and setting of, the WHS.

The Management of the World Heritage Site

The responsibility for the management of the WHS rests primarily with the two landowning bodies, the National Trust and Moyle District Council, and with EHS who is responsible for the designation to UNESCO through DCMS. That part of the WHS which is owned by the National Trust has also been designated a National Nature Reserve and a draft plan for its conservation management has already been prepared by the Trust.

A management plan for the WHS is a requirement of the UNESCO World Heritage Convention Operational Guidelines. These Guidelines indicate that a 'natural' WHS should have a management plan in place as soon as possible after a site has been nominated to the World Heritage Committee. In the case of the Giant's Causeway a management plan is desirable for a range of reasons, including the need to obtain consent from EHS for notifiable operations within the ASSI and candidate SAC. It is also advantageous to funding bodies to have a clear and up to date expression of management objectives and priorities accompanying applications for grant aid.

Following completion of the AONB Management Plan, EHS will invite the key parties to join it in the preparation of WHS Management Plan, as recommended by the Consarc Report⁶. This plan will embrace visitor management issues as well as the scientific interests associated with the WHS and other national and international designations affecting the site. Work towards the preparation of this plan will commence immediately.

The Setting of the World Heritage Site

The unique qualities of the WHS are created by its combination of spectacular geological features and a magnificent setting. The relationship between the regularity of the basalt columns and the wildness of their coastal setting has made a deep and lasting impression on those who, throughout history, have visited the site.

The Department's nomination document for the WHS emphasises that the geological features of the Causeway Coast cannot be viewed in isolation from their spectacular, wild and natural setting facing the North Atlantic. The special qualities of the setting are fundamental to the appearance, experience, appreciation and future management of the site. The WHS and the AONB are thus inextricably linked, and the former needs specific consideration within the AONB Management Plan.

Within the Operational Guidelines for Implementation of the World Heritage Convention, there are guidelines on the protection of World Heritage Sites through the careful consideration of site boundaries and the inclusion of "buffer zones":

'Whenever necessary for the proper conservation of a cultural or natural property nominated, an adequate "buffer zone" around a property should be provided and should afford the necessary protection.'

'A buffer zone can be defined as an area surrounding the property which has restrictions placed on its use to give an added layer of protection; the area constituting the buffer zone should be determined in each case through technical studies. Details on the size, characteristics and authorised uses of a buffer zone, as well as a map indicating its precise boundaries should be provided in the nomination file relating to the property in question.'

These guidelines have been translated into planning policy within Northern Ireland and can be found in Planning Policy Statement 6 – Planning, Archaeology and the Built Heritage (March 1999). PPS 6 states that

'development plans will include local policies relating to the WHS and its setting to safeguard such areas.'

Policy BH 5 states that:

'The Department will operate a presumption in favour of the preservation of the WHS. Development, which would adversely affect such sites or the integrity of their settings, will not be permitted unless there are exceptional circumstances.'

It goes on to state that, in the absence of a clearly identified setting to the WHS, and

'as an interim measure until such time as a new development plan is prepared for the area and this matter is addressed, development proposals within a 4km radius of the site will be subject to particular scrutiny by the Department.'

Defining the Setting

The terms of reference for the production of this Management Plan highlighted the need to review the setting of the WHS in relation to existing policy stated above and to refine the 4km zone. The methodology used for assessing the setting is set out in Volume Two Part 2 Theme 5.

Defining the setting of the WHS involves the identification of a Zone of Visual Influence, ie where there are views from the site to the surrounding landscape and where there are views from the surrounding landscape to the site. The WHS boundary runs close to the top of the cliffs encompassing mainly cliffs and foreshore within the designation. However the edge of the coastline within the WHS sweeps up before dropping almost vertically to the shore. As a result of this topography the WHS is both visible and distinctively recognisable within the surrounding landscape. Equally, the elevated nature of the cliff top walk within the WHS boundary results in extensive views inland. As a result of this, the Zone of Visual Influence, and thus the landscape that can be shown to fall within the setting of the WHS, extends over a considerable distance (see diagram 9 in Volume Two).

Although all the land within the Zone of Visual Influence can be described as forming the setting to the WHS it does not all have equal significance and influence. Policy BH 5 as indicated above stresses that development which has an adverse impact on the integrity of the setting will not normally be permitted. The integrity or wholeness of the setting relates closely to the integrity or intactness of the landscape character within it.

The function of the landscape in providing a setting to the WHS can be divided into three categories; 'distinctive, supportive and connective' and these are described below. These categories represent

landscape setting of differing significance and influence one's experience and appreciation of the WHS based on proximity to the WHS, unique views or sequence of views, approaches, as well as inherent landscape characteristics. This assessment demonstrates that the landscape within the setting of the WHS has an important role to play in forming part of the visitor experience - the visitor experience is not confined to the boundary of the WHS alone.

The three categories are as follows:

Distinctive

This comprises land adjacent to the WHS that forms the immediate setting and is significant in views to and from the site. Examples include the middle and foreground views from the cliff top walk within the WHS looking south across coastal heath and rural mixed farming of the Causeway Plateau. It also includes the most spectacular and unique views of the profile of the WHS, which are gained from the coastal area to the south west.

There are also areas of land which fall into the 'distinctive' category but which do not have continuous views to the WHS. These areas are classified as 'distinctive' because they are significant in providing an approach to the WHS and thus in building anticipation and sense of arrival. An example includes the land between Bushmills, Portballintrae and the WHS. Here the sequence of spaces and glimpsed views to the crenellated cliff line and the character of the natural coastal landscape through which one passes (ie coastal dunes, beach, mixed farming hinterland) is vital in providing a rural context to the wilder qualities of the WHS itself.

Supportive

This includes land which performs a significant function in bolstering the role of the distinctive setting. It comprises medium distant and elevated views to the WHS and also significant ridgelines, which can form the skyline, when viewed from the WHS cliff top walk. This area provides a geographical context to the WHS comprising a predominately rural and unspoilt open hinterland. It is therefore sensitive to the cumulative impact of development as well as development which is visually prominent because of the choice of building materials, scale of development and or location (on a ridgeline or breaking the skyline).

Connective

This comprises land which is some distance from the WHS, but within the Zone of Visual Influence. From these areas there is often a substantial foreground of land or sea in views to the WHS. In some areas there are limited views to the WHS due to topography, vegetation or built development but these areas form an important landscape context all the same. Here the distance from the WHS means that these landscapes are less influential in providing a context to the visitor experience and development in this landscape, when viewed from the WHS, is often less discernible.

This assessment is significant to the preparation of detailed policies relating to development control and the protection of the setting of the WHS in line with PPS 6 Policy BH5. Current policy relating to the 4km radius requires 'particular scrutiny' of all planning proposals within this area. This policy will remain in place for all categories within the setting of the WHS now defined, ie to include distinctive, supportive and connective areas as described above. Special care will also be taken to ensure that the landscape qualities and sensitivities of the setting are not undermined through the loss of, or detriment to, views, approaches or landscape character as described above.

Visitor Facilities Serving the WHS

As the most popular and heavily visited site within the AONB, the management of visitors at the Giant's Causeway has implications across the entire Causeway Coast. Earlier studies identified ways in which the existing facilities and visitor management on the site could be improved, recognising that there were some shortfalls in provision. However, a fire in April 2000 at the visitor centre has provided the opportunity to review more comprehensively the future provision of facilities to provide access, information and to interpret the WHS.

Since the fire there have been a number of planning applications for development within the vicinity of the Causeway Head. This development pressure highlights the importance of having a clear strategy for visitor facilities and the need to appreciate the setting of and approaches to the WHS. Furthermore, the opening of the heritage railway from Bushmills has introduced a new choice of transport to and from the WHS, and highlights the need for the site to be considered in the context of a wider transport strategy for the AONB.

All of these issues pointed to the need to review the purpose, type and scale of visitor facilities at the WHS in the context of a wider visitor management strategy for the whole of the AONB. This has been considered as a key aspect of the Management Plan. The Department has concluded that appropriate visitor facilities should continue to be provided at the site for the following reasons:

- **Nature of site and its unique qualities**
The Giant's Causeway is a natural site. Its special qualities relate to rugged scenery, a challenging environment and weather, vast scale and natural forces of nature. Locating visitor facilities at the Causeway Head provides an opportunity to inform visitors about the character and dangers of the site, to provide them with often necessary shelter and refreshments and to enable them to view the coast and seascape under cover. They must not, however, compromise the special natural qualities of the WHS.
- **Visitor movement**
It is important to disperse visitors quickly and safely on to the site, and preferably via the coastal path to encourage further use and exploration on foot from different vantage points. This is most effectively achieved from a central hub enabling easy access and the provision of a choice of routes.
- **Precedent**
The WHS nomination included the existing visitor facilities at the Causeway Head because they formed an integral part of the visitor experience. There is therefore a precedent for some type of visitor facility/welcome at the Causeway.
- **The need for a high quality visitor experience**
It provides a definitive destination for visitors, ie the facility and the site itself are understood as a single entity.

The provision of appropriate visitor facilities at the Giant's Causeway should also give consideration to the following:

- **The visual impact of existing developments**
The extent of development at and immediately adjacent to the Causeway Head is significant and has a considerable impact on views from the surrounding countryside and on the approach to the WHS. The retention of visitor facilities at the Causeway Head should be

accompanied by measures to reduce the impact of existing development and urbanising influences in order to improve the setting of the WHS, provide a sense of arrival, and prepare the visitor for experiencing a natural phenomena. The synergy between the Causeway Hotel, replacement visitor facilities, the Nook and the Heritage Railway terminus as a 'group' needs to be fostered, and must be carefully integrated with their landscape surroundings. Other developments and facilities should be located in existing settlements, providing economic and community benefits in the most appropriate locations.

- **The need to adopt sustainable tourism principles including sustainable transport**
The re-development of visitor facilities at the Causeway Head will need to consider their relationship with other visitor facilities within or in close proximity to the AONB, and the means of transport between them. They should link into and support a wider AONB transport strategy in order to deal with predicted increasing visitor numbers. As such, action should be taken to encourage people to arrive at the site using sustainable modes of transport and over time to reduce car-parking requirements at the site.
- **Scale and content**
The scale, design and content of visitor facilities are also important. It is essential that they should complement and inform a visit to the Giant's Causeway and that they provide more detailed information on the WHS than would be expected at a TIC or an orientation centre for the AONB. Facilities should be of the highest quality befitting a WHS, cohesive and serve the needs of the site by putting the visitor experience above the need for financial return. A clear long-term strategy for the visitor centre is also important in order to avoid the gradual accumulation of facilities at the site, as numbers of visitors grow.
- **Access, security and public safety**
Locating visitor facilities at the Causeway Head assists on-site management of visitors including public safety, monitoring, access, and security. Information and guidance at the visitor centre should be supported by on-site guides who can provide reassurance, direction, interpretation and encouragement to explore the site. In all cases, the introduction of physical safety measures on site needs to be assessed against adverse visual impact and the consideration of alternative options for providing a safe environment for visitors.

Key Objectives

The following objectives have been identified as a result of an assessment and analysis of the issues affecting the AONB and consultation. Proposed actions associated with each objective are presented in Volume Two of the Management Plan.

Objective V: To ensure the integration of WHS management issues within overall AONB management decisions.

Objective W: To conserve the geology, geomorphology and biodiversity of the WHS.

Objective X: To conserve, and enhance where appropriate, the natural beauty of the WHS landscape, as well as its landscape and seascape setting.

Objective Y: To attract visitors to the WHS at levels that it can sustain.

Objective Z: The boundary of the WHS should be kept under review to ensure that its outstanding universal significance is adequately protected.

4. IMPLEMENTING THE PLAN

Although EHS is responsible for their designation, the task of 'managing' the countryside and coast within AONBs is spread amongst many bodies. This is as true for the Causeway Coast as it is for other AONBs. The breadth and range of action points contained within the Consultants' recommendations illustrate how the active involvement of a number of bodies is essential if the objectives of the Management Plan are to be achieved. Thus EHS attaches great importance to developing methods of delivering management of the countryside within AONBs and establishing appropriate and inclusive partnerships to meet this end.

The Consultants' report discusses the key characteristics of a successful management body for the Causeway Coast drawing from experiences in English AONBs in particular. It emphasizes that whatever management structure is devised it must have influence in the area but be sufficiently flexible to be able to adapt to changing circumstances. Having reviewed the possible alternatives it concludes that a management body capable of delivering the action points must address the following areas of concern:

- (i) it should avoid unnecessary duplication and bureaucracy;
- (ii) it should have sufficient focus on the AONB and its core issues and not have inherent conflicts within its organisational structure;
- (iii) its members should have the power and authority to make decisions and drive the management of the area, and
- (iv) it should have the financial and practical resources to deliver the management objectives.

Of particular relevance to this discussion is the formation of the Causeway Coast & Glens Heritage Trust. The Heritage Trust is a partnership body established in May 2002 in order to protect and enhance the unique qualities of the Causeway Coast & Glens area. The area covered by the Trust, from Limavady to Newtownabbey, has a wide variety of scenic landscapes, important wildlife resources and cultural heritage, all contributing to the area's significance as a tourist destination. With this in mind, the Heritage Trust aims to protect and enhance its natural and cultural resources and to promote a sustainable tourism industry for the benefit of both visitors and the people who live and work in the area.

The Heritage Trust arose from the work of the Causeway Initiative, which brought together a range of different organisations interested in the promotion of sustainable tourism in the Causeway Coast & Glens area. As part of this work, the Initiative commissioned a 'Visitor and Environmental Management Strategy' which recommended the formation of a permanent Trust in order to promote visitor and environmental management and sustainable tourism in the area.

The Heritage Trust is an independent company limited by guarantee and is managed by a Board of 19 Directors, plus advisers and observers. Its Directors include representatives from the eight district councils within its area of operation and representatives from the tourism, community, farming and environmental sectors. There are three core staff employed by the Trust on a full-time basis, the Trust Director, Natural Heritage Officer and Administrator. Two additional staff are dedicated to the delivery of a special initiative under Peace II, the Natural Resource Rural Tourism Initiative, which aims to promote sustainable tourism in the area.

The aim of the Heritage Trust is to promote environmental management and sustainable tourism to protect and enhance the unique heritage of the Causeway Coast & Glens area. It is therefore considered appropriate to look to the Heritage Trust to providing the means of co-ordinating and facilitating the management of all three AONBs within its area. This approach has the advantage of building on an existing partnership and benefiting from its 'critical mass' rather than devising a new one which would have overlapping objectives with the Heritage Trust.

EHS is therefore asking the Heritage Trust to establish a Causeway Coast Management Group to function under the umbrella of, and be serviced by, the Trust and its staff. The primary purpose of this Group would be to oversee the delivery of action points in the Management Plan. Its membership would not be confined to Directors of the Heritage Trust; we envisage that it would comprise of representatives from the two district councils and others representing recreational, community, scientific and tourism interests in the local area.